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RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 1626
RUEHWN/AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PRIORITY 1035
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0600
RUEHGE/AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN PRIORITY 1132
RUEHKG/AMEMBASSY KINGSTON PRIORITY 0376
RUEHPO/AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO PRIORITY 0272
RUEHSP/AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN PRIORITY 0341
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO PRIORITY 0171
RUEHTG/AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA PRIORITY 0085
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0199
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 2094

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 000353

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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/NAVAL EXERCISES: DUTCH CABINET HAS
THE BALL

REF: A. A) THE HAGUE 311 B) SORESENSEN E-MAIL

[1](#)B. 2/15/06 C) THE HAGUE 275 D) STATE 18806

Classified By: CDA Chat Blakeman; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) This is an action/guidance request. Please see para
[1](#)7.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary: The Dutch cabinet is seized with the issue of proposed carrier port calls to the Netherlands Antilles and is expected to discuss it, as well as the upcoming Caribbean Lion exercise, at the February 17 cabinet meeting. A final decision, however, will all also require consultations between authorities in The Hague and in the islands, which could add a few days to the decision making process. National Security Advisor Rob Swartbol and MFA Western Hemisphere Kingdom Affairs Advisor Karel de Vey Mestdag have both stressed to us the GONL's desire to strike the right balance in dealing with Venezuela. On the one hand, The Netherlands wants to make sure the GOV is clear it has no veto over Dutch actions in the Netherlands Antilles; on the other, strong ties between the Antilleans and Venezuelans could cause an overly provocative approach to backfire. Among the options being considered would be to welcome a carrier visit to St. Maartens while passing, for now, on a Curacao port call. End summary.

Decision is with the cabinet

[1](#)3. (C) NSA Swartbol confirmed in a February 14 meeting with Charge that the questions of U.S. amphibious participation in the Dutch Caribbean Lion (CL) exercises and of the proposed carrier port visits were before the cabinet. The issues were discussed at a cabinet meeting on February 10 but no conclusions were reached; the next cabinet meeting at which the issues could be on the agenda is on February 17. Swartbol said that he and several cabinet advisors would be travelling to the Dutch naval headquarters at Den Helder on February 15 for a day-long retreat, and these issues were likely to be raised. Swartbol confirmed that

there is a difference of opinion between the Dutch military and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but he hoped a closer understanding would emerge from the retreat. In general, MOD is more comfortable with a Curacao carrier visit than is MFA.

14. (C) Swartbol emphasized the importance of historical and family ties between the Netherlands Antilles and Venezuela. He noted that ties extend into the government of the Netherlands Antilles and even to some in the Dutch diplomatic service. Dutch proprietary feelings about the islands run deep, he said: "they are our islands," and "we think we know best" how to deal with them. That said, he believed that the U.S. and the GONL are "almost on the same line" with regard to Venezuela policy. We need a tough stance, he said, but the GONL does not want to unnecessarily provoke Chavez into taking retaliation.

Consultations with Netherlands Antilles

15. (C) Swartbol noted also that the GONL would have to consult with the Government of the Netherlands Antilles (NA), before any final decision could be made. In a separate meeting on February 15, MFA Western Hemisphere Kingdom Affairs Advisor Karel de Vey Mestdagh told poloff that there was a constitutional requirement to consult with the NA government before the cabinet could make a final decision. He noted, however, that such consultations could be concluded within a few days and should not create a significant delay in the process.

GONL sensitivities: Constitutional Restructuring

THE HAGUE 00000353 002 OF 002

16. (C) De Vey Mestdagh underlined Swartbol's comments concerning historical and family ties to Venezuela. The islands began a process of constitutional reform in November 2005. It is likely that St. Maarten and Curacao will achieve a degree of autonomy similar to that of Aruba, while the other three islands of the Netherlands Antilles will move to something closer to Dutch protectorate status. The GONL does not want to give Chavez any help in disturbing, or taking advantage of, the negotiations. The process is officially scheduled to conclude in mid-2007, but both de Vey Mestdagh and his deputy, Anton Schellekens, expect it to take until 2008 or 2009.

Possible Compromise Proposal

16. (C) De vey Mestdagh confirmed that one option the cabinet is considering would be a compromise under which the George Washington would be invited to visit St. Maarten, with the more politically sensitive port call to Curacao delayed until a more propitious time. (Note: This is consistent with ref b.) He noted, however, that the MFA had been informed by MOD that such an option would be unacceptable to the USG, and asked whether this was the case. POLOFF stressed that we have not received guidance on this option, which, as far as we know, has not been formally proposed.

17. (C) Action/Guidance Request: The Cabinet is likely to discuss the port visit request on February 17 and may even take a preliminary decision. If there is an agreed USG position with regard to the possible compromise described para 6, it would be useful to convey it to the GONL before it makes an offer we are likely to reject. Post therefore requests cleared front channel guidance by COB February 16 clarifying the the USG's likely response to such a proposal. End Action/Guidance Request.

BLAKEMAN